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ABSTRACT

The hypothesis of a negative relationship between level of self-actualization and fear of death was based on the assumption that people are not afraid of death per se but of the incompleteness of their lives. Fear of death was furthermore assumed to inhibit orientation toward the future, thereby restricting movement toward achievement and self-fulfillment. In contrast, acceptance of death and acknowledgement of one's finitude is thought to act as a galvanizing force, impelling one toward creativity and accomplishment. If one succeeds in it, the fear of the incompleteness of one's life and with it the fear of death should be conquered. An interview schedule and a semantic differential scale were devised to tap attitudes toward death on conscious and fantasy levels. Interviews were conducted with two groups of highly self-actualized individuals, 10 artists and 10 scientists, ranked as outstanding in their field, and with two control groups of respondents. The artists and scientists did not differ significantly in their attitudes toward death, though distinctive tendencies of intragroup homogeneities emerged in each of the groups. Significant differences were found in the hypothesized direction between the two high actualized groups and the control groups. (Author)

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WINNING THE RACE WITH DEATH[1]

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This research grew out of two tenets, both plausible yet not entirely consistent. The first states that everyone is afraid of death (Feifel, 1973); the second, that people are not afraid of death per se, but of the incompleteness of their lives. The recurring theme in literature, philosophy, biology, psychology runs somewhat like this: Fear of death is fear of dying prematurely, before reaching some level of self-fulfillment by having accomplished something particularly one's own and thereby having had an effect on the world around. But once one's unique potentials have been actualized, once one has given form or structure to the possibilities within oneself, one no longer fears death, or as Kaufman puts it, "one has won the race with death." Thus one may hypothesize that the more complete one's life is, the more one has fulfilled one's destiny, the less one fears death, with at least a theoretical possibility of no fear of death, when all one's potentials have become actualized.

To test this hypothesis empirically death attitudes of individuals most likely to have reached the highest levels of self-actualization were investigated and compared with death attitudes of others along the self-actualization continum, including the apparently least actualized individuals, those experiencing life as having been unfulfilling, incomplete, wasted, expressing it by such statements as "not having had a chance", not having done their thing".

1. Some of this material has been discussed at the Annual Meeting of the American Suicidology Society, April 1974, to be published in Omega, Winter 1975.

Up to date 623 persons have been interviewed. I shall focus here on the high actualization individuals, that is top-level artists and scientists[2] (each having been rated by professionals and critics in their own field as belonging to the top ten in that field), and on two control groups of respondents, closely matching the artists and scientists on all but the creativity-accomplishment dimension. The rationale then, for the choice of the 2 highly creative groups was based on the assumption that experienced self-fulfillment is a function of successfully actualizing one's potentials as manifested in objective achievements. Thus, the greater one's creative accomplishments, the more one has fulfilled one's destiny, the less one should fear death.

Attitudes towards death on a conscious and on a phantasy level were tapped by individual, in-depth semi-structures interviews guided by an interview schedule, devised for this study. Open-ended and specific questions were used. Semantic differential scales were also used as indicators of overall positive or negative attitudes towards death and towards life. All interviews were male. The mean age of each of the groups was between 53 and 55 years. Each interview lasted on the average one hour (40-90 min.).

I shall first discuss responses to three questions on the Interview Schedule (#3, 6,7) dealing with phenomenal time perspective, one facet of one's attitude toward death, which shed some light on the more quantitative findings and at the same time reveal some of the more intangible, qualitative aspects of these attitudes.

A positive relationship was hypothesized, between acceptance of one's own death and breadth of phenomenal time perspective, which is consistent with assumption of previous investigators (Kastenbaum's 1972, suggestion of apprehension about death as a factor in the tendency to rein in thoughts of futurity, impairing the ability to plan ahead; Seiden's 1969, positive correlation between fear of death and a shortened time perspective and optimism with longer time perspectives). Specifically, it was predicted that creative individuals project their needs, wishes, thoughts and when

2. Some of the artists and scientists interviewed were: Nathan Milstein, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Isaac Stein, Paul Doktor: William King, Altan Tobey; Alan Arkin; E.P. Wigner, Lyman Spitzer, John A. Wheeler.

applicable, their own person) into both, the far distant past and the far distant future, while individuals on lower levels of self-fulfillment have narrower, more constricted time perspectives, with an overwhelming emphasis on the present, the immediate past and the immediate future. The first (I.S. #3) is a direct question about the respondent's emphasis on experienced time, that is, does he focus (invest energy) primarily on past, present or future.

Four of the ten artists and one of the scientists felt no distinction between these dimensions, experiencing the present as embracing past and future. The scientists were overwhelmingly future oriented - - 7 out of 10. Only two artists and two scientists were primarily present oriented. None of them referred to the past as the most important time dimension. As a matter of fact, almost every one in the high creativity-achievement groups voiced a disinterest in his past. There were no statistically significant differences between the artists and the scientists, though distinctive tendencies of intra-group homogeneities emerged; i.e. artists ignore imposed categories (also seen in answer to the next two questions) and imposed their own organization on experiences (expressed here in an emphasis on the oneness or unity of time); and scientists by their emphasis on the future. Each of the high creativity groups differed significantly from each of the perspective control groups. The quantitative data I am presenting here was obtained by combining the two high creativity groups (N 20) and the two control groups (N 20). In contrast to the responses of the artists and scientists, the respondents in the control group were overwhelmingly present oriented, namely 11 out of 20 (Table 1). Six emphasized the past, two the future, one the totality or unity of time. Differences between the high-creativity and the control group were significant at the .001 level ($x^2 = 18.12$, 3 df).

The second and third question (I.S. #6 and 7) were devised to tap time perspectives and attitude towards death on a phantasy level. The intervieews

were asked to imagine that after they died, they would come back once, for a short period of time; when would they choose to come back: 2 years, 10 years, 100 years or 1,000 years after their death. In accordance with the hypothesis, it was expected that the more extended time intervals will be chosen by the high creativity respondents and narrower intervals by the respondents of the control group. The 2-10 year choice was furthermore conceived as indicating a negative attitude (non-acceptance) toward death - - an effort to hang on to life. Though no statistically significant differences were found between the artists and scientists, intra-group homogeneity became again evident. Thus, four of the artists gave an unexpected reply: they did not want to come back at all. The typical remarks were: this life was completely fulfiiling - - it was all he wanted - - not interested to see what happened afterwards - - apres moi le deluge. Two chose the 1,000 and three the 100 year interval; only one chose the ten year interval. Scientists, on the other hand, were most interested in the far distant future. Six chose the 1,000 year interval - - all of them expressing great curiosity as to what the world would be like - - two chose 100 years, one 10 years and one did not want to come back at all, saying " I would be worried about what I would see here - it would be sad".

In sharp contrast to the high creativity groups, the majority of the respondents in the control groups, that is 11 of 20 chose the 2-10 year interval (Table 2). The most frequently given reason for this choice was wanting to see how the family was making out. In a number of cases respondents remarked that if they had a free choice, they would prefer much shorter intervals, than the 2 years, preferably a few days after their death. Reasons given were: seeing their own funeral; seeing how others take their death; not wanting to die at all. All wanted to come back. Three chose the 1,000 and six the 100 year interval. Differences between the high creativity and the control groups were significant at the .005 level. (x^2 11.94, 2 df).

The next question dealt with the choice of visiting a period before the respondent's birth. Any period could be chosen, but 2-10 years before their birth, 1700-1900 and Antiquity were specifically offered as possible choices. Here again half of the respondents in the artist-group said that they did not want to visit a past period, while half of the respondents in the scientist group wanted to go back as far as their imagination could take them back: dawn of human consciousness; creation of the universe; see what most primitive caveman were like. None of the artists and only one of the scientists chose the 2-10 year-before-birth period. Again, no statistically significant differences were found between the artist and the scientist group, but the high creativity groups combined differed significantly from the combined control groups. (Table 3). Seven respondents of the control group chose the 2-10 year-before-birth period, five (of 20) chose Antiguity; none said that he did not want to visit the past. (X^2 10.51, 2df, $p>.01$).

Analysis of the answers to the above questions suggests that the artists are less interested in a time "when they are not," and put greater emphasis on this life being satisfying, fulfilling, sufficient. In spite of the failure to project into the distant past and the distant future (as the scientists do) one can hardly conclude that the artists' phenomenal time perspective is narrow. On the contrary, it is all-embracing, defying any kind of boundary or constriction. An interesting and unexpected aspect was revealed by the artists' and scientists' disinterest (and often impatience) in their own past, especially remarkable since most of them mentioned that they have had a "good life". There are indications that the more positive a person evaluates his past the less he feels the need to hang on to it; while the opposite seems to hold for those who have a negative evaluation of their past.

Two other similarities in experienced time perspectives of artists and scientists were manifested. To the question "how long do you expect to live"

artists and scientists in their 50s responded frequently "a relatively short time left - - 15 to 20 years"; while respondents in the control groups in their 60s frequently "blocked" to the question, unable to answer it, or said on a number of occasions, "very far off - - 15 to 20 years." This is a clear example of differences in phenomenal time perspectives of objectively the same time interval.

To the question of whether preferring recognition now or in 100 years, there was a tendency in artists and scientists not to be interested in either of the choices, stating that neither was important as long as they felt that their work was good. In contrast, all of the control group respondents were interested in recognition, most of them preferring it now.

On the semantic differential scales, on which respondents rated their meaning of death and of life, artists had the highest positive rating on death, of all the groups interviewed thus far. Scientists had a slightly negative score on the death scale. It may be interesting to compare the average scores of five groups - - 10 respondents in each group - - of approximately the same mean ages (50-55) and of the same socio-economic class.

Scores can range from +4 to -4.

Death Scale:	Artists	+.7
	Scientists	-.5
	Control I	+.2
	Control II	+.2
	Physicians	-1.9
Life Scale:	Artists	+2.4
	Scientists	+2.6
	Control I	+2.5
	Control II	+3.4
	Physicians	+0.5

I shall relate now some of the qualitative, harder to define, and perhaps more fundamental aspects that emerged in the course of the study. To begin with, interviews with artists, especially with performing artists, are harder to obtain than with scientists. Aside of the "famous people syndrome"

(busy, too much in demand, fear of exploitation) the death taboo does play an important rule. Artists are actively sheltered by people around them, from what may be an upsetting topic. None of the female artists contacted, agreed to an interview. Scientists were far more accessible. Somewhat related to this observation was the difference in conduct of artists and scientists during the interview. Artists had a remarkable tendency to side-track from the topic of death, sometimes even remarking that they would much rather discuss other things. However, there were no indications that artists fear death more or are more uncomfortable discussing it than scientists are, but rather they do not have the need to openly acknowledge their mortality. Most of the artists report extremely low preoccupation with their own death, in contrast to scientists who acknowledge their interest and high preoccupation with death.

Some of these differences may be ascribed to different defense mechanisms operating on different levels of awareness. Scientists attempt to come to terms with their mortality through open confrontation. To quote some of the recurring statements: "...taking the strangeness out of it, by thinking it through...acknowledging the inevitableness...understanding all that can possibly be understood...". This may refer to what Maddi calls "courageous confrontation." Artists on the other hand, express their innermost feelings in their work. Death is one of the main themes in art. They can represent death in their paintings, symbolize or interpret it in music, dramatize it in literature. Thus, sublimation may be at its most successful with artists capable of expressing the most sublime. There is also a feeling, expressed by some, that death is part of them, within them, while scientists seem to conceive death as an external force, which needs to be understood intellectually.

In conclusion, I would like to raise the question whether the race with death can be won. Only one of the artists interviewed gave the impression of having reached self-fulfillment, or of a completed life. All of his responses

were consistent; he enjoyed life but he was willing and ready to die at any moment; he felt he had fully actualized his potentials, and had acheived the highest level of functioning he was capable of. Thus, he could not surpass himself. His death and life scores on the semantic differential were highly positive. He has won the race with death. But is it worth it? There seems to be something missing in his present life - - the excitement, the joy de vivre is gone. He is 65 years old and Isaak Stern referred to him when he said: Age is certainly relative; on one hand, you have my, "young" friend Arthur Rubinstein (88 years old) and on the other hand, my "old" friend X, who is 23 years younger.

This brings Browning's lines to mind: "Ah but a man's reach should exceed his grasp or what is heaven for".

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Table I

Conscious Time Perspective

	Unity	Past	Present	Future
Creative Group N 20	5	0	4	11
Control Group N 20	1	6	11	2

x^2 18.12, 3 df, p >.001

Table 2

Return After Death

	No time	Extended 100-1000 yrs	Constricted 2-10 yrs
Creative Group N 20	5	13	2
Control Group N 20	0	9	11

x^2 11.94, 2df, p >.005

Table 3

Visit Before Birth

	No time	Extended before 1900	Constricted 2-10 yrs
Creative Group N 20	6	13	1
Control Group[a] N 20	0	12	7

[a] One respondent could not answer question

X^2 10.51, 2 df, p >.01